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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MEXICO 000966

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/01/2028
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [ETRD](#) [ETTC](#) [MX](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: MEXICO NORMALIZES RELATIONS WITH CUBA

REF: MEXICO 676

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Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor James P. Merz. Reason: 1.4
(b),(d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Foreign Minister Patricia Espinosa visited Cuba March 13 normalizing relations between the two that had chilled considerably in the course of the Fox administration. Espinosa pointedly decided not to meet with the Cuban dissident community and it appears human rights were likely addressed only in general terms. Instead, discussions touched more upon matters relating to immigration, trade, and Cuba's debt to Mexico. House staffer Robyn Wapner urged Mexico to keep human rights at the center of its discussions with Cuba. Mexican officials insisted no decision had been made regarding future meetings with dissidents but clearly signaled Mexico's focus was on promoting friendly relations which would contribute to expanded commercial ties. End Summary.

Bringing a Relationship in from the Cold

¶2. (U) Mexico was only Latin American country that retained diplomatic, political and economic ties with Cuba immediately after Castro's revolution in 1959 helping it burnish its self-image as an "independent voice" in Latin America. However, Foreign Minister Jorge Castenada's meeting with anti-Castro dissidents during a February 2002 visit to Havana and President Fox's decision in April 2002 to vote in support of a UN resolution condemning human rights abuses in Cuba opened a new chapter in Mexican-Cuban relations. Fox was embarrassed when Castro promptly released a tape of a conversation in which Fox urged Castro to depart early from a March 2002 Summit on Financing for Development so as to avoid a confrontation with U.S. President Bush. In 2004, Fox temporarily removed Mexico's Ambassador to Cuba after Castro issued a blistering attack on Fox, furious with Mexico for having supported again the UN resolution condemning abuses in Cuba. Relations remained frosty through the remainder of the Fox administration with Cuba suspending its repayment of a multi-million dollar debt to Mexico.

¶3. (U) Keen on reclaiming Mexico's reputation as an independent voice in Latin America, focused on maximizing commercial opportunities, and worried about rising numbers of Cuban migrants using Mexico as a staging ground to enter the U.S., Mexico under President Calderon has sought over the course of the last year to improve relations with Cuba amongst other states including Venezuela. Foreign Minister Espinosa's visit to Havana March 13-14, formally within the context of the "Mechanism for Information and Policy Consultation" between the two countries, served the official culmination of this process. It

produced agreement in the following areas

-- The two countries agreed to "reactivate" at least a dozen consultative mechanisms covering areas including migration, drug trafficking, trade and industrial development, transport, agriculture and fishing, foreign trade, tourism, health and the Joint Commission on Cooperation.

-- The joint communiqué underscored a "high level of concordance" on UN resolutions and sympathy for candidacies prioritized by each country. It also pointedly reiterated their "opposition to the imposition of unilateral coercive measures and, in that context, the blockade imposed by the United States government on Cuba." Mexico acknowledged Cuba's support for UN resolutions on immigrant rights.

-- Human rights were only touched upon in the context of their congratulating each other on the creation of the UN Human Rights Council, an exchange of information relating to the reports they will present next year to the Universal Periodic Exam mechanism, and special UN visits each country has received.

-- On the economic side, Mexico had already agreed in February to restructure \$400 million of Cuban debt (reftel) and Mexico's Foreign Trade Bank (Bancomext) announced it had opened a \$25 million credit line aimed at kick starting stagnant trade.

Staffer Presses Mexico on Human Rights Concerns

14. (C) In her meeting with Mexican Foreign Ministry (SRE) officials, House Foreign Affairs staffer Robyn Wapner stressed the importance her boss, Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, attached to Mexico manifesting concern on human rights, particularly by meeting with the Cuban dissident community. Mexico's Deputy Director General for Latin America Victor Arriaga maintained Mexico was seeking to "recover space" it had lost

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over the course of recent years in its relations with Cuba including economic space contributing to lost investment and trade opportunities. Arriaga shared a table reflecting some 16 bilateral mechanisms Mexico had established with Cuba, some dating back to over three decades ago, but lamented almost none had been utilized over the last 10 years. Cuba was Mexico's neighbor and Mexico had fundamental issues including migration questions to address with Cuba. In her recent visit to Cuba, Mexico's Foreign Minister had discussed human rights in "cooperation with the Cuban Government" and in the context of multilateral mechanisms. Mexico had made no decision on whether to meet with dissidents in the future. Notwithstanding efforts to play down the Foreign Minister's visit to Cuba and suggest it was open to raising human rights in the future, Mexico's SRE official made it clear Mexico's present priority was on deepening ties with Cuba.

15. (C) Arriaga remarked that the Mexican Foreign Minister's visit to Cuba had come in response to an invitation by the GOC and was inspired by the desire to reactivate the Permanent Mechanism on Information and Political Consultations which had not been utilized since 1998. The visit was a culmination of a process that had been playing out over the course of the previous year. Both governments sought to "turn the page" on a relationship that had grown stale and sour over recent years. He maintained much discussion centered on the subjects of debt, immigration, and human rights.

16. (C) Wapner acknowledged Mexico's right to renew relations with Cuba but expressed concern about the Foreign Minister's decision not to meet with the Cuban dissident community. Arriaga and Minister Armando Vivanco Castellanos, SRE's Deputy Director on Human Rights, took pains to explain that human rights were discussed in the context of cooperation between the two governments and mechanisms availed by international organizations. Vivanco maintained it was important to evaluate Cuba on the basis of international rules and to rely on international mechanisms for evaluating progress. Arriaga lamented the fact that the U.S. was not a member of the newly founded UN Human Rights Council. He noted the Council would convene next year and that as Mexico and Cuba were both members it would serve a useful venue to address human rights. Arriaga qualified Cuba's decision to receive the

UN rapporteur as positive and said the two countries were exchanging information on their respective experiences including as relates to human rights issues.

17. (C) Comment. SRE clearly seeks closer ties with Cuba for a variety of reasons. SRE regards the tension that characterized relations with Cuba over the course of the Fox administration as a chapter in Mexican history it would like to put behind itself. On a more pragmatic level, Mexico seeks to recover some \$400 million in debt the GOC owes Mexico and build cooperation on how to stem the flow of Cuban migrants into Mexico. It also seeks to expand investment and trade opportunities it feels suffered as a product of the tension between the two countries over recent years. While SRE officials maintained human rights were addressed it appears apparent raising human rights concerns on a serious level, including by meeting with Cuban dissidents, was sacrificed to the overarching goal of reestablishing more normal relations with Cuba. SRE officials have indicated that FM Espinosa invited the GOC Foreign Minister Felipe Roque to visit Mexico in the coming months. It is rumored he will arrive with an invitation for President Calderon to visit Cuba, perhaps as soon as September, and that the President is predisposed to accept the invitation.

GARZA